ViCEPHEC 2021: Opening Keynote

Title: The Trials and Tribulations of becoming a SOTL Scholar

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Script

I am opening with: A long time ago in a Galaxy far far away to get viewers attention.

So now that I have your attention. I want to begin with a story--sorry it's a different story.

Scholarship of teaching and learning is the story of us--I mean everyone who's involved in teaching and learning in higher education. It is about us joining a bigger narrative we are all participating in moving the sector further in developing improving advancing learning and teaching and assessment in higher education. Now using SoTL is a way for us to join our efforts to join the voices and share experiences about what we do in the classroom, but also about issues way beyond that.

But let's start at the beginning.

SoTL has many definitions and much disagreement across the sector of what it actually means. I don't want to waste much time of my 20 minutes—giving a side-eye to the organisers—on dissecting a variety of definitions and the history of SoTL. I will share some papers with you that might give you an overview. However, I want to make some terminology very clear. SoTL is a victim of its nomenclature, and terminology gets easily confused. Very often when people say scholarship they actually mean SoTL. One of the things to consider if you think about scholarship look at any dictionary the rough by definition is that it has something to do with engaging in other people's research, scholarship, and write and think about it.

There is another term which you may have come across which is 'scholarly'. Scholarly for me is the absolute baseline of how we want to approach our teaching. It means we have evidence informed teaching. For instance: I'm planning my teaching based on research around learning and teaching what other people have found their scholarship or their SoTL.

What does this have to do with SoTL? You're wondering. Well, I've had a discussion lately with colleagues about what is worth writing about? In my example above this would have been the next step right--to write about what I have done. However, that is a whole other stumbling stone. I talk about later. So the colleague asked how do we know what is worthwhile sharing with others? If it is something that's not a big deal for the sector?

Maybe a better way of thinking about this is to think about who would benefit from your story? Who would benefit from your voice? Because never forget your voice is important! Your learning is important, the journey you are on is important. Yes it may predominantly be important just for you, or for your context, your school, your college, your institution, your discipline but it is important.

For instance I'm an experienced educator and what you're going to publish may not be a new hat for me but it also might. Because education is a vast field with influences from psychology from social sciences from euro in cognition sciences from behavioural sciences philosophy from the myriad of sub-disciplines that is education. What you have written about I may not have heard about before.

Or I might not be an experienced educator I might be really new and I've just entered my little space glider and I have no idea which direction to go and I may come across your paper because I just started teaching a course and I inherited all this material someone else has designed and I have no clue where to even begin and your paper might be my lifeline you may actually give me the coordinates for where I have to go to. You might help me to understand where to start, give me some ideas, and even if it is just a bit of solace, I find in your paper then this is important. So, think about your audience in your writing. And the writing is important because sharing making it public moves your scholarly engagement into the realm of scholarship of teaching and learning. This is just the beginning of scholarship of teaching and learning. The next step is something we probably all would understand as evaluation of your practice--evidence based practise. Your scholarly engagement is evidence informed practise, your next step is evidence based practise. Now the tricky bit is how we do go about creating, collecting, establishing that evidence.

And this is where I find colleagues particularly from non-cognate disciplines often struggle because social science can be quite murky when it comes to developing educational enquiries so developing designs for your research. And one of the most often used responses I give unfortunately: "it depends on" when I'm asked about how to go about designing an educational inquiry aka a SoTL project, which methodology or methods to use my response immediately usually is it depends on.

But let's backpedal for moment so we have addressed scholarly, we have a rough understanding of what scholarship means and a little bit about scholarship of teaching and learning. In the next phase of this we are leaving our little space glider and we're moving into a full-blown spaceship, because we have engaged in scholarly practice, in some scholarship and dipped our toes into SoTL.

The next step can be anything from using the Start-Stop-Continue technique with your students at the end of a session, or having a dialogic relationship with them and listening to the feedback implementing the feedback and then evaluating the implementation. Now here it becomes immediately tricky.

The warning lights in our spaceship go on and there's a meteor about to hit us and we really need to undertake an evasive manoeuvre. Because, the scholarship of teaching and learning has three characteristics the sector roughly agrees on. The first is it has to do with learning and teaching in higher education, the second one it is subject to either peer review or peer feedback of some sort, and a third one which is implicit in the previous one is it needs to be published or public. Now the warning lights come on because the moment you collect data from your students and you want to make that public you have to have ethics approval.

It doesn't mean that in all circumstances you have to have consent, you might use data that the students depending on the data sharing agreement in your institution have already agreed to share. However, you still have to let the Ethics Committee know that this is what you're doing you have to let them know which of the data the students agreed to share you are using; how you're using it; why you're using it; and what you try to get out of that. If you want to collect data from scratch the application becomes even more complex. But if you don't want that meteor to hit your spaceship the ethics application is your evasive manoeuvre.

How many times did this happen to you? You've done something with your students; you added an activity, changed that one session, or started using a new educational technology or just tweaked something a little bit, and half-way a through the year you realise that this had a significant impact on the student experience. You can see the changes. They are tangible, and you can't talk about it, because you don't have ethics.

Sorry, you lost your spaceship the meteor hit, and you need to use a new one. Good news is: you survived. However, there is still a way forward. What you could do is; you could still write about it, but you can't talk about your students, you write about it as a reflective practise piece or a reflexive practise piece. You draw on literature and share your own experience of seeing what has informed your thinking about that change. What made you implement the change how did you decide on the new teaching methods what made you decide what literature and what is the aim you want to achieve.

Do not apply for flat-line ethics at the beginning of each academic year because that is unethical as well but that would be a whole other talk. However, if you think you want to implement a change if there is something new, something different, if you tweak something in your teaching, it has the potential to change the student experience. Think about if you need ethics for that.

There is more!

Our Spaceship is special it can fly into the black holes in our universe and explore. Stay with me this is a story! Black holes in our universe of education are the dark corners of your teaching you don't want to poke at with a big stick it's the stuff that doesn't quite work it's that one course, that one session, that one lecture, that just doesn't sit right. Here comes your very harsh on-board security announcement: this can be painful.

I am making a sweeping assumption now; because are here, you want to share your practise, you want to share your findings, so I'm making a big assumption that you care. That you care about your students, you care about your role as a teacher, as an educator, as an instructor—I don't know which word you choose for your identity.

Poking at the dark corners in our teaching practise can be painful, but this is also why we have to poke at them. Why we have to understand these dark corners, and have to take them apart. What I want to say is: we're not just undertaking SoTL about changes we implement, we also undertake SoTL when there is something that doesn't work and we want to understand why it doesn't work but this is not an easy process. And this is where having colleagues to support you, building your networks like you are do during ViCEPHEC21 is really important.

So, you've done it! Right? You have identified what scholarship of teaching and learning is you have applied for ethics you have collected data. You have had some findings you've published them and then you find an opinion piece from someone who says SoTL is really awful because it just keeps reinventing the wheel.

This is why we have to think about the next question. And the next question I want you to think about is: What is knowledge? How is created? I said earlier that your experience is important, and your voice is important. Thinking about who your audiences is, is a first step when thinking about dissemination of SoTL. But the other part also is to think about the purpose of SoTL. If we can create new knowledge through innovation for the whole sector that is fantastic but this is more often rarity then it common purpose of SoTL. In many cases the innovation is at a local place in your school your discipline your institution. And then we need to think about if innovation is the right way of thinking about learning and teaching.

The last challenge I want to pose is the idea that SoTL, that learning about learning and teaching, is not discipline specific. Because how we make sense of the world; how we make sense out of a situation; how we learn as human beings; how our brain processes information and remembers, is not discipline specific. Very often when you look at SoTL projects they are discipline focused. The delivery methods, are sometimes discipline specific—although, have you ever thought what creative writing students could do in a lab? And the processes. But how we make sense of the world is not depending on a discipline.

How we engage them in that meaning making process. How we encourage them to want to learn and also to understand how they as an individual learn and make sense out of the world and take ownership and control of that process. And this loops back to SoTL, because in this question of: How do we make sense of this world; what is knowledge? Is the challenge of thinking about who holds the power of knowledge creation.

So, if I look at SoTL projects, when I'm reviewing papers for journals, very often questionnaire and focus group are the only methods considered. Unfortunately, also often in situations where a questionnaire is not the most appropriate method to use. And yes, there are situations where a questionnaire is the most appropriate research method or a focus group. However, if I design a questionnaire particularly an exclusively quantitative questionnaire. I am designing a filter. The question I develop with a Likert scale or prioritising answers or choose two out of five assume a specific way of answering. They assume a pre-set of answers. How often have you filled in a questionnaire—you know one of these customer service questionnaires—and you looked at the questions; and you thought: I actually don't agree with any of the option, but this one is kind of-sort of the closest.

So, what happens is that we are applying these filters in the method design. It is not inherently wrong, but it will be biased in some way shape or form. So, what I want to do today. To finish this somewhat strange keynote. Where I'm speaking into the ether, thinking about the space we are all moving in. Is I want you to think about it participatory and creative research methods. I want you to think about how you can involve your learners in that joint ethical meaning making process. How can you involve your learners and yourself in that conversation to jointly co-create knowledge and thus challenge existing power structures and challenge pre-supposed knowing of what answers might be. And this is scary, and this is murky, and there is no right way of doing it. But it can also be fun, and it can be challenging, and you might be really, really surprised by the answers you get. Thank you for your time.

Descriptions for Audio-Only Access

There are a couple of things you might miss when only listening to the audio. There is a bit of text overlay in the bottom left screen throughout the presentation: the ViCEPHEC21 hashtag and my Twitter-handle. A couple of times throughout the presentation I have words such as 'Ethics' in the top right corner of the presentation so viewers have an orientation where we are in the talk as there are no slides.

A couple of call outs you might be interested in are:

- Ethical co-construction of knowledge, when talking about designing SoTL projects

- The three defining characteristics of SoTL the sector agrees on:

  o Has to do with Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

  o Is subject to peer feedback

  o Is public (or published)

There is a call out when I was talking about ethics the crows in the garden started to caw ominously, which I thought was rather timely.

The other elements of this presentation are: the theme is space, every time I make a reference to it the background image changes to an image from space.

When I say space glider a digital doodle of a space glider drops onto the screen. It looks oval shaped with a large front window, and two engines left and right to it.

When I say spaceship, a spaceship of the saucer persuasion drops onto the screen. It has a glass dome and bullet windows all around it. A careful observer would notice that the light reflections on the spaceship are a rainbow.

During the warning we are going to be hit by a meteor section, the video is interrupted with a red screen with large white letters saying: Danger. I overlayed this mini video section with a vintage filter so it looks as if it is from an old movie.

Resources Mentioned and Used

Open Source Media

Thank you to the artists who generously make their work available under CC license!

Matt Oakley: SciFi Opening from Free Music Archive:
https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Matt_Oakley/scifi-soundtrack-kit/scifi-opening-1

Jeremy Thomas on Unsplash for the space image (I could not find the direct link as I got this through the Bazaart App)

Resources I refer to during the talk

The National Teaching Repository: https://figshare.edgehill.ac.uk/search?q=ntr (I am the lead curator for the SoTL section get in touch if you want to submit material)

SoTL as a victim of its nomenclature:
https://srheblog.com/2019/03/25/the-scholarship-of-learning-and-teaching-a-victim-of-its-nomenclature/

Self-guide through a SoTL project: Self-Guided Research Assistant
https://figshare.com/projects/Self-Guided_Research_Assistant/117360